

STATION 3: Marie Therese Bourgeois Chouteau (Madame Chouteau)

Unit: Women (Middle and High School)

At this station you will find:

- IMAGE: Portrait of Marie Therese Chouteau (Madame Chouteau)
- OBJECT: Chouteau China
- Information about Madame Chouteau
- Madame Chouteau's Receipt

Information about Madame Chouteau

During their stay in the St. Louis area before the expedition, Lewis and Clark stayed with Pierre Chouteau much of the time. Pierre and his brother, Auguste, were members of one of St. Louis's most prominent families. Most likely Lewis and Clark met Pierre and Auguste's mother, Madame Marie Therese Bourgeois Chouteau.

Madame Chouteau, common-law wife of Pierre Laclède and mother of Auguste and Pierre Chouteau, was of French heritage. Even though she overcame numerous obstacles in her life to become one of the most well-known and respected women in early St. Louis, her decisions in life were often directed by the restrictions that the law placed on women.

Marie Bourgeois was born in 1733 in New Orleans. She and innkeeper Rene Chouteau married in 1748 and had a son, Rene Auguste. When the child was very young, Rene deserted his family and left for France. Marie Therese and her young child were left to fend for themselves. In 1755, Pierre Laclède came to New Orleans from France in order to seek his fortune. Madame Chouteau and Laclède became close friends, set up house together, and later moved north to St. Louis. Although their living arrangement was against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, they remained together despite Rene Chouteau's attempts to assert his marital rights when he returned to Louisiana.

It was only because of her family's influential standing in the St. Louis community at the time Rene Chouteau attempted to "reclaim" his wife in 1774 that the authorities did not force Madame Chouteau to return to him. Rene Chouteau died in 1776, and that ended the argument. Since divorce was not allowed by the church or state, the children of Madame Chouteau and Pierre Laclède never legally took Laclède's name. They all remained "Chouteau." Madame Chouteau died in 1814.

The document relates to Madame Chouteau's involvement in litigation. In *The First Chouteaus*, William E. Foley and C. David Rice write: "after her slave Baptiste was found slain in December 1785, Madame Marie Therese Chouteau lost little time in

charging her son-in-law Joseph Marie Papin with responsibility for the slave's death and demanding compensation in the amount of \$1,000. Baptiste had been accidentally shot as Papin and his brother-in-law (Sylvestre) Labbadie attempted to apprehend some fugitive Indian slaves who had concealed themselves in Madame Chouteau's barn. The case dragged on for sixteen months before the parties involved agreed to a final settlement requiring the owners of the renegade Indian slaves to contribute the \$600 in damages awarded to Madame Chouteau."

The document is presented in its original Spanish form, along with a translation from 1883 and the translation. The original Spanish document contains Madame Chouteau's signature and is thought to be the only surviving copy of her signature in existence today.